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RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHDC
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC
RUCPDC/NOAA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
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RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR
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SIPDIS

STATE FOR OES/IHB, OES/SAT, OES/PCI AND OES/EGC
STATE FOR EAP/K, ISN/NESS AND STAS
STATE PASS TO EPA FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS
WHITE HOUSE FOR OSTP AND CEQ
DOE FOR INTERNATIONAL, NE, FE, AND EERE
USDOC FOR 4400/MAC/EAP/OPB/ITA/TA
USDOC FOR NIST
HHS FOR OGHA
HHS PASS TO NIH FOR FIC
STATE PASS TO NSF FOR INTL PROGRAMS
STATE PASS TO NRC FOR INTL PROGRAMS

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SUBJECT: SEOUL ESTH UPDATE - APRIL 2009

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ENVIRONMENT

Korea to Begin Controversial River Restoration Projects in September

11. On April 27, the Korean government unveiled an interim plan for its four major river restoration projects, aimed at flood control,

securing sufficient water supplies, upgrading river water quality, and reviving ecosystems, as well as boosting local economies through job creation to carry out the various projects. The program to renovate the country's four major rivers - the Han, Nakdong, Geum, and Yeongsan - is a key part of the 50 trillion won (USD 37 billion) Green New Deal, a set of policies the government announced earlier this year aimed at laying the groundwork for the country's green growth. The final plan is scheduled to be announced by the end of May, after a series of public hearings and consultations with relevant ministries and agencies. The restoration activities are scheduled to begin in September after Korea's rainy season.

12. The four-river restoration program calls for the construction of several small- and medium-sized dams, reinforcement of river banks, and the dredging of designated shallow areas as flood control measures. Dam construction, along with the construction of new reservoirs and the expansion of existing reservoirs that will to store up to 1.25 billion cubic meters of fresh water, is intended to alleviate expected water shortages, as well as provide water for increased irrigation. Improved water quality and revived ecosystems will be accomplished through the construction of increased numbers of sewage facilities and banning riverbank farming to prevent direct inflow of pesticides and fertilizer. In addition, more than 1400 km of bicycle trails, with pedestrian paths and sports facilities will be constructed along the riversides to promote tourism and "green culture." The government will build two medium-sized dams and eight reservoirs on the Nakdong River, three reservoirs each on the Geum and Han Rivers, and two reservoirs on the Yeongsan River. In addition, 96 existing reservoirs will be expanded.

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13. Public opinion on the river restoration program remains mixed. Some newspapers have praised it, saying it will "...enliven the rivers and their regions by improving water quality and securing water resources." Opposition parties and some members of the public continue to oppose the plan saying it is preparation for the cross-country canal scheme that President Lee Myung-bak withdrew last year in the face of strong opposition. Other environmental groups and some academics have said the program focuses on water security and riverside aesthetics rather than on restoring ecosystems.

Climate Change Affecting Korea: Southern Peninsula Becoming Sub-Tropical; Fruit Production and Fisheries Altered

13. According to National Institute of Meteorological Research data, the average temperature on the Korean Peninsula has increased 1.7 degrees Celsius since 1912, more than double the rise in the global average temperature rise of 0.74 degrees. Dr. Chung Yong-seung, Director of the Korea Center for Atmospheric Environmental Research says that the border between temperate and sub-tropical climate in East Asia used to lie between Cheju Island and the Korean Peninsula, but has crept northward in the past few years to include the southern parts of South Jeolla Province and South Gyeongsang Province. The National Statistical Office (NSO) said on March 24 that this climate change has impacted the country's agricultural and fishery production. Cultivation of apples, a temperate zone fruit, which amounted to 43,650 hectares in 1996, contracted to 29,204 hectares in 2007. While apples are disappearing, cultivation of peach trees and tangerine trees is increasing. "As danger from frost damage is decreasing, peach cultivation is expanding," an NSO spokesperson explained. Tangerines, a subtropical fruit that used to be cultivated only on Jeju Island, now is growing also in the southern parts of the Peninsula.

14. The fishery sector is another industry affected by the change in climate. Cuttlefish catches, which totaled 75,000 tons in 1990, jumped to 186,000 tons in 2008 as the sea around the Korean Peninsula has become warmer. Anchovies also have become more plentiful, and they, in turn, attract mackerel and tuna, which feed on them. Pollock, meanwhile, which thrives in colder waters, is quickly disappearing, with catches of 27,000 tons in 1990, but a near zero catch in 2008 due to both warmer water and over-fishing.

Korea to Build "Smart Power Grid" Pilot Complex by 2011

15. Korea plans to build a "smart power grid" pilot complex by 2011 that can enhance the country's ability to more efficiently use power resources, the Ministry of Knowledge Economy (MKE) said in a March 28 press statement. The future-oriented grid merges conventional power lines with information technology (IT) infrastructure and satellite communication systems, and permits real-time monitoring of electricity demand and output. MKE said the complex would act as a pilot project to check the feasibility of the "smart grid" system before expanding it on a national scale.

16. Korea operates a flexible electricity power pricing system that levies higher charges during peak times of electricity demand of the day. The smart grid system will allow consumers to immediately check how much power they are using and choose to operate appliances

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when the price is cheaper.

17. The plan is part of Korea's effort to increase energy usage efficiency. MKE said a decision would be made by November on where to build the smart grid pilot complex, with construction to be completed by June 2011.

Korea to Invest in Seaweed Biomass as a Future Biofuel Source

18. Korea will spend 365 billion won (USD270 million) over the next 10 years to create new seaweed farms that can increase the country's ability to produce marine biomass energy, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (MIFAFF) said on April 22. The plan by MIFAFF calls for the creation of 35,000 hectares of seaweed biomass in the territorial waters on the east and south coasts and near Jeju Island that can eventually produce up to 1.56 billion liters of ethanol per year by 2020.

19. Currently, Korea grows seaweed on approximately 11,000 hectares of seaweed farms. But most farmed seaweed grown in Korea is consumed as food; moreover, seaweed is not yet cultivated on a large enough scale to allow commercial ethanol production. In addition, according to local scientists, the domestic capability to produce bio-fuel from seaweed is not yet efficient enough to make the process economically viable (in contrast to ethanol production from other biomass materials like corn). Research and development is currently underway to improve methodologies to use seaweed as a bio-fuel source.

1500 Dolphins Spotted in Sea of Japan during Whale Watching Test Cruise

110. The City of Ulsan, on Korea's southeast coast, used to be the commercial whaling center of Korea. Its economy suffered when Korea acceded to the moratorium on commercial whaling imposed by the International Whaling Commission in 1986. Since the moratorium, the area has seen increased number of whales and dolphins, and Ulsan City is taking a new approach to benefit from their presence. According to local news reports of April 14, when Ulsan city authorities test-operated its whale/dolphin watching cruise ship on the Sea of Japan off the coast of Ulsan City to assess the potential for whale and dolphin watching tourism, ship operators spotted a spectacular 1500 dolphins about three miles off the coast of Jangsangpo Port after just 30 minutes of sailing. City officials said in their news release that they will start operating the ship every weekend beginning at the end of May.

Science & Technology

NASA and the Korean Aerospace Research Institute Discuss Possible Cooperation in Civil Space and Aeronautics

¶11. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the state-run Korea Aerospace Research Institute (KARI) held a bilateral meeting from April 21-22 to discuss possible cooperation areas in civil space and aeronautics at the KARI compound in Daejeon. The 10 member NASA delegation was led by Michael O'Brian, the NASA Assistant Administrator for External Relations, and the

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Korean delegation was led by Hwang Jin-young, the KARI Director of Policy and International Relations. Both sides agreed to have a second round of discussions in the summer in Washington to identify possible areas of cooperation in such fields as space exploration, earth science, space communications, space science, and aeronautics.

Health

Korean Centers for Disease Control Recalls 1122 Products that Use Talc Containing Asbestos

¶12. The Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) released on April 10 a list of 1122 medical, cosmetic and other products from 120 companies that use talc containing asbestos. KCDC recalled and banned all but 11 of the products, for which there are no suitable substitutes. Separately, the Prime Minister's Office said it will forbid the production and importation of talc containing asbestos and develop comprehensive restrictive measures and standards for the carcinogenic material by the end of June. The series of actions come a week after domestic media began reporting on baby powders, cosmetics and drugs that were found to contain asbestos. (Note: No U.S. products are affected because, as the Korean media has noted, the U.S. and European Union have banned products containing asbestos.)

Tuberculosis Infection Rate Declines Slightly in 2008, but Remains High

¶13. The number of South Koreans who were diagnosed with tuberculosis last year inched down but its infection rate remained high compared with other countries, the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said in a recent report. According to the report, a total of 34,340 people were newly diagnosed with tuberculosis last year, slightly down from the previous year's 34,710. Of the total number of 34,340 TB patients, nearly 10 percent -- 3,387 people -- were diagnosed with multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) cases, and about 10 percent of them suffer from the more virulent extensive drug resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB) strain.

¶14. Despite the health authorities' efforts, the rate of new infections in the country is not slowing down. After falling to an annual new infection low of below 31,000 in 2003, the number have been on the rise, with an additional 34,000 to 35,000 people diagnosed with the disease annually in recent years. This year is the first time the organization made the number of MDR-TB patients public.

Dementia Affects 420,000 Koreans, Is Expected to Increase as Population Ages

¶15. Over 400,000 senior citizens suffered from dementia last year and that number will likely increase further in the coming years as

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the country's population is rapidly aging, a government report showed on April 13. According to the report by the Ministry of

Health, Welfare and Family Affairs, the number of people afflicted with the disorder stood at 420,000 last year, comprising 8.4 percent of those aged 65 or older. The number will likely exceed the one million mark by the end of 2027 as the nation's population ages at a faster pace, the Ministry projected.

¶16. The increase in cases of dementia is expected to place a strain on the country's social, health and financial resources, as well as on the resources of families who have members suffering from the condition. In September last year, the Korean government launched a drive to help affected families by unveiling a financial support program to help elderly citizens receive early diagnosis and treatment for the condition. Under the program, senior citizens will receive a free cognitive function check-up every two years, while those from low-income families will receive financial support for treatment.

STANTON